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ABSTRACT

An application of reader response criticism, with its abundance of ways of construing readers, permits writing teachers to identify sets of readers for students more effectively than simply exhorting them to remember their audience while writing. Composition teachers can employ the concept of "narratee" (the author's alter ego) as a heuristic device, having students articulate, as clearly and precisely as they can (1) the narratee they envision for each piece of writing they produce and (2) the changes and actualizations that readers of their papers must undergo in order to become that narratee and to derive from their own texts what they intend. After using the concept of narratee as an inventional tool, student writers can then proceed to create and produce the text itself, with the concept of the "implied reader." The implied reader embodies all of those predispositions laid down within and by the text itself whereas the narratee addresses the predispositions established by conditions outside of the text. Student writers need to act on the knowledge that writing means arranging linguistic cues to enable readers to form schema to make sense of textual features, and that effective writing lends itself to being apprehended as a series of gestalts. (HOD)

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The Phenomenology of Composition: The Application of Certain Principles of Reader-Response Criticism to the Teaching of Composition

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The object of literary research these days appears not so much to be the text itself, but its transformation by readers into an aesthetic object in much the same way that the object of much writing teaching has shifted from the text-as-product to the text-as-process. Recent literary theory has seen new and renewed interest in readers and the act of reading, with several new volumes of reader-response criticism appearing within the last couple of years, most notably two excellent anthologies of essays, Suleiman and Crosman's The Reader in the Text and Tompkins' Reader Response Criticism.[1] You may have also noticed in the most recent issue of College English an essay-review of these two books as well as another piece on reading-writing relationships, and at this convention itself there are numerous panels devoted to exploring writing-reading connections.[2] Reading and writing, we should remember, may not be all that significantly different from one another, for as James Moffett reminds us, they are both meaning-making processes of abstraction:

> The root idea of comprehension resembles remarkably that of composition, despite the fact that they are supposed to be opposing sender and receiver viewpoints. To comprehend means to take together. The difference between "put together" and "take together" is the difference between composing and comprehending. . . . The common idea that people make sense, create meaning, seems to acknowledge that whether composing something themselves or comprehending someone else's composition, people are in the same basic position. . . . Within this similarity of making sense, then, composing and comprehending differ in whether one is abstracting from raw reality or from another's abstraction of it. . . . This is a difference in the level at which one is abstracting.[3]

I believe that as writing teachers we can be nourished by this trend to study reading-writing relationships, for in much the same way that we speak of the dialectic of "learning to write" and "learning by writing," so too do reader-response critics speak of "learning to read" and "learning by reading" as they study the transactions between readers and texts.

Let's make clear from the start that reader-response criticism represents no monolithic entity. It embraces a multiplicity of different approaches within a huge theoretical space, all of which seem to have adopted a method that shifts the reader from the periphery to the center of critical attention. I have used the word "phenomenology" in my talk's title because the phenomenological theory of art has emphatically drawn attention to the fact that the study of literature should concern not just a text but the sets of actions involved in responding to it and making it accessible. Phenomenology, it seems to me, underlies the epistemological assumptions of all reader-oriented approaches: that the object of knowledge can never be separated from the knower, that the perceived object can never be separated from perception.[4] Generally, reader-response criticism sees the text as a means of communication, and the reader and the text are conceived as partners in a process of communication, though the understanding of that partnership varies, depending upon whether you read David Bleich, Wayne Booth, Jonathan Culler, Stanley Fish, Walker Gibson, Norman Holland, Wolfgang Iser, Gerald Prince, Louise Rosenblatt, or others, critics who are included, one way or another, under the rubric "reader-response," and yet who seem apparently incompatible for they represent sometimes opposing sets of interpretive conventions. Whatever dif-

ferences divide these critics, however, what they all see as fundamental is the creative role of the reader, for they are united in their opposition to the idea that the text is the exclusive location where meaning might reside. Rather, they study the reader's transformations of signals represented within a text, examining the dynamic, dyadic interaction of text and reader, with its character of an "event," to borrow Stanley Fish's word.[5]

Because readers animate a text, a piece of discourse must be judged on its effects, so we might say the hallmark of any approach to the teaching of writing of literature that bears the reader-response critical stamp is that we must encourage our student-writers to pay close attention to their audience, for its recipient is the primum mobile of every text. We must help our students to see their writing as a kind of plan or blueprint for a circuitry whereby a reader will be guided to decipher signs, not to find meaning, but to make it. Writers do not simply "pass on" information or present it to be extracted; what they do do is synthesize it and offer it for further synthesis and replenishment. No reader, as Rosenblatt reminds us, is a blank tape registering a ready-made message.[6] Instead, our students must be taught to recognize that all readers are agents who build meaning and that comprehension is far more than the intake of atomistic particles of content, for it involves the integration of content into one's previous knowledge as he establishes connections. The conduit metaphor for verbal communication is intellectually bankrupt--to draw that tired diagram, with "message" sandwiched between "sender" and "receiver" just does not describe the reading-writing nexus and the exchange that is transacted within it. What our students need to understand is that

writing is very much a give-and-take, appreciating it is a "performing art."[7] Like literature, the expository essay goes beyond conveying inert information, to attempt to convince its reader that the model of reality it represents is valid. If we, as teachers, could construct our assignments remembering that reader-response critics tell us that the principle of indeterminacy underlies all communication, then we may guide our students beyond grinding out academic writing that is one-dimensional in its discussion of a subject matter its reader already knows (and may have ceased caring about).[8] Writing, thus conceived, becomes a sharing of world views, and producing it becomes the reward of our craft.

Like any other performing artist, our student-writers must keep their "others" in mind, though there is certainly no simple relation between a writer's linguistic stimulus and the reader's response to it. An application of reader-response criticism, with its abundance of ways of construing readers, permits us to identify sets of readers in a way that they can be addressed more effectively than simply exhorting students to remember their audience. The critical literature is replete with readers--the informed reader, the competent reader, the ideal reader, the superreader, for instance, but these all imply some alienation from the kind of reader--the real reader, for example--that most of us (and particularly most of our students) face. And I ask, why should there be such a thing as an ideal reader, for as Iser observes, " . . . if this were possible, communication would be superfluous, for one only communicates that which is not shared by sender and receiver."[9]

In lieu of these idealized readers, I recommend that two other constructs might well be adapted to composition pedagogy.

These are Gerald Prince's "narratee" and Wolfgang Iser's "implied reader," both of which are versions of Walker Gibson's "mock reader," the artifact that is the author's created second self, an alter ego, of sorts, that embodies the mask the reader must take on in order to experience a work.[10]

Distinctions that are commonly made between author and persona (distinctions most of our students understand) may be extended to distinctions regarding the reader, and Gerald Prince's narratee is a device for doing this. Relaying between persona and reader and author and reader, the concept of the narratee describes the kind of person the reader must become in order to enjoy the fullest transaction with a text, literary or otherwise. It is for the reader what persona is for the writer. I believe we in composition teaching can employ the concept of narratee as a heuristic device, having our students articulate, as clearly and precisely as they can, 1)the narratee they envision for each piece of writing they produce and 2)the changes and actualizations that readers of their papers must undergo in order to become that narratee and to derive from their own texts what they intend. For our students, thus describing and defining one's narratee can be a powerful practice for invention, for it specifies audience in concrete operational terms, delineating what it must know and do.

After using the concept of narratee as an inventional tool, student-writers are bolstered to proceed to create and produce the text itself, with the concept of the "implied reader." The implied reader embodies all of those predispositions laid down within and by the text itself (whereas the narratee addresses the predispositions established by conditions outside of the text). The implied reader,

as Iser emphasizes, has its roots enmeshed in the structure of the text--it is the construct through which a reader becomes inscribed in a text. A successful text enables its readers to be situated in such a position they they may assemble, possibly, the meanings toward which the author wishes to orient them. The concept of the implied reader enables students to explain what it is they are doing linguistically to achieve rhetorical purposes, i.e., what they are doing with the language that will enable their readers to realize their intentions, to transact with their squiggles on a page. It puts the reader in the text, forcing students to take responsibility for the textual choices that they make.

Bad prose is often clearly recognizable because it demands that we become people we do not wish to be or cannot be. Such prose makes too many demands, or too few. When we are irritated with our students sometimes, is it not because they have placed us in reader roles which we refuse to accept? I believe using these constructs of audience--the narratee and the implied reader--helps to eliminate this type of writing problem by firmly making writing an outcome of a dramatic I-Thou relationship, even if that relationship is completely imaginary or imaginative. As teaching devices, the narratee and implied reader permit students to role-play, to perform <u>explications de texte</u> on their own writing, much as they do for greater authors, in their literature classses.

In performing such explications, we might have our students borrow reader-response's preeminent question, which is Stanley Fish's question: "What does _____do?"[11] The blank may be a sentence, as it so often is for Fish, though his method of slowing down the reading process can be used to analyze smaller units such as words as well as larger units such as paragraphs, as well as stylistic

devices.

Reader-response critics devote much thought to describing the act of reading itself, and what they describe, drawing on work in psycholinguistics, might well help us in the writing classroom. To read is to experience a kaleidoscope of perspectives, and a reader negotiates a text through various sequences of decisions, revisions, anticipations, rehearsals, and retrospective recoveries; reader-response critics report that reading is primarily an activity of formulating and modifying expectations. As writing teachers, then, we must impress on students that their primary goal, it seems to me, is to arouse expectations and then to satisfy them, using the panoply of techniques available to them as writers.

Both for comprehension and composition, it is the principle of consistency-building (cognitive psychologists call it the principle of good continuation) that decides whether a piece of writing will succeed or not.[12] Our student-writers need to act on the knowledge that writing means arranging linguistic cues so that readers can form schema to make sense of textual features, that effective writing lends itself to being apprehended as a series of gestalts. Successful prose is prose that readers can structure, engaging them (Iser calls it "entangling" them) in the work of transforming a series of words into sentences and sentences into larger meaningful units of discourse. What matters, according to the reader-response critics, is harmony, so that students need to be taught to construct harmonious texts, ones with both structural and conceptual connectives that will guide their readers through the multifarious levels of any written product. Students need to explore

when less is more, for Iser has written extensively about "blanks," those gaps in a text that actually forge coherence when the reader has been competently conditioned to fill the rift with the appropriate meanings.[13] We overemphasize explicitness, I believe, sacrificing the intimacy of subtleties well constructed.

Connections between reader-response criticism and the study of writing necessarily involve attention to style. Parallelism, repetition, even rhythm, rhyme and alliteration become not ornaments for the reader-response school, but are (as Richard Lanham described all figurative language at the M.L.A. convention in New York City last December) cues for activating a reader.[14] As synecdochic of all writing, these are parts of a code--conventions--that writing students must master. Of course, the text itself does not transmit this code per se; it activates it in the human reader, on whom it depends for its existence.

Most of the principles I have touched on are derived, as you know, from literary theorists trying to understand what an aesthetic experience involves. If all of this seems too removed from our ordinary classrooms and the ordinary language we use in them, let me begin to conclude by quoting from Stanley Fish, speculating about how ordinary "ordinary language is." He writes, "There is no such thing as ordinary language. . . . ordinary language is extraordinary because at its heart is precisely the realm of values, intentions, and purposes which is often assumed to be the exclusive property of literature."[15]

The ideas of this talk, most of them still germinating, have constituted more than anything else something of a prolegomenon, or--in its etymological sense--an essay for the study of the applicability

of reader-oriented criticism to the teaching of writing. By your very presence here, you have shown an interest in transactions between readers and writers, an interest, I believe, that will help preserve writing as a human, sharing communicative activity in which we attend to one another's voices, resisting certain temptations abroad to reduce it to a technological skill. Readability might be a utilitarian notion, but it is also, to be sure, an aesthetic one. I hope you will continue to pursue this interest. Thank you.

Notes

[1] See Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, eds. The Reader in the Text. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980; and Jane P. Tompkins, ed. Reader-Response Criticism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1980.

[2] See James Hoetker, "A Theory of Talking about Theories of Reading," College English, 44 (February 1982), 175-81 and in the same issue, Michael Steig, "Reading and Meaning," 182-89.

[3] James Moffett and Betty Jane Wagner. Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), p. 8.

[4] Tompkins, p. ix ff. expatiates on this point.

[5] Stanley E. Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," New Literary History, 1 (Autumn 1970), 123-62.

[6] Louise M. Rosenblatt, Literature As Exploration, rev. ed., (1938; rpt. New York: Noble and Noble, 1968) extends this point.

[7] Louise M. Rosenblatt, The Reader, The Text, The Poem. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p. 28.

[8] D. W. Fokkema and Elrud Kunne-Ibsch, Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century. (London: Hurst, 1978), p. 154 ff.

[9] Wolfgang Iser, The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1978), p. 29.

[10] Gerald Prince, "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee," in Reader-Response Criticism, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 7-25 and Walker Gibson, "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers," College English, 11 (February 1950), 265-69.

[11] Fish has many examples of how this question may be asked.

[12] Iser, p. 16 ff.

[13] Iser, p. 180 ff.

[14] Richard Lanham, "Composition and Literary Study: The Tar Baby and How to Embrace It," MLA Convention, New York City, 29 December 1981.

[15] Stanley E. Fish, "How Ordinary Is Ordinary Language?," New Literary History, 5 (Autumn 1973), 49.